

THE FAQs OF HIV

REAL ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

SERIOUSLY...

If you've been diagnosed with HIV, know someone who has or if you're living a lifestyle in which you're likely to catch the disease, no doubt you have concerns. This book will lay those common, frequently asked questions out for you and answer them in plain talk.

HIV and AIDS are ongoing illnesses, and the world has made great strides in understanding and fighting these conditions during the last 30 years.

Remember this: Knowledge is power. The more you know, the better armed you'll be at fighting this destructive virus or protecting yourself from ever getting it in the first place.

Be smart. Be strong.

DISCLAIMER. This book provides general information about HIV and related issues. The information does not constitute medical advice and is not intended to be used for the diagnosis or treatment of a health problem or as a substitute for consulting a licensed health professional. Consult with a qualified physician or healthcare practitioner to discuss specific individual health needs and to professionally address personal medical concerns.

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BASIC DEFINITIONS OF HIV

TALKING THE TALK

Before we get too deep into this discussion, it's important to know what all these letters stand for and what they mean. Here are some basic terms to know and understand.

HIV = HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS

The virus that causes AIDS. This virus weakens your ability to fight infections and disease. Being HIV positive does not mean you automatically have AIDS, but if left untreated, it can lead to AIDS.

AIDS = ACQUIRED IMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME

The last stage of HIV infection. When a person's CD4+ cell count drops to a low level, the ability to fight certain cancers is lost. AIDS-defining illnesses are defined as those bearing conditions leading to immune system failure. Early detection and treatment of HIV can often prevent progression to AIDS.

STD = SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASE

Any disease that is transferred from one person to another through sexual contact. Also known as venereal disease.

T-CELLS

This type of white blood cell matures in the thymus (T) and is an important part of the immune system that fights pathogens and infection.

CD4+ CELLS

A classification of T-cells, referring to those that carry the CD4+ antigen. Most of these are helper cells that fight infection. When an HIV sufferer's CD4+ count is less than 200, he or she is said to have AIDS, and a risk of infection is extremely high. A blood test given by a doctor can determine your CD4+ count.

A DEADLY GAME OF CATCH

Q: How do people catch HIV?

A: Someone can get HIV when an infected person passes the virus to him or her through body fluids entering the bloodstream. These include:

- Blood
- Semen
- Vaginal fluids
- Breast milk

Certain activities run a higher risk of contracting HIV. These activities are:

HAVING UNPROTECTED SEX.

Vaginal or anal intercourse without the use of a condom, or oral sex without a latex barrier with an infected person greatly increases the chances of catching the virus.

SHARING NEEDLES.

Using contaminated hypodermic needles to inject drugs into the bloodstream increases the chance for infection. HIV can also be transmitted by dirty tattoo needles or body piercing needles.

RECEIVING A BLOOD TRANSFUSION FROM AN INFECTED PERSON.

While all blood is thoroughly tested before a transfusion in the U.S. and Western Europe, some underdeveloped nations run the risk of passing contaminated blood to recipients of transfusions.

BEING BORN TO A MOTHER WITH HIV.

An infected mother can pass the virus on to her baby during pregnancy, at delivery or through breast milk.

Q: Who can get HIV?

A: Anyone. Young, old, male, female, rich, poor, and any nationality, regardless of sexual preferences. And once you have it, you can spread it to others.

Q: Where can the virus enter the bloodstream?

A: The HIV virus can enter the bloodstream through:

- the mouth
- the sex organs
- the anus
- broken skin, including from needles and injections

THE TIP-OFF

It's important for healthcare workers to take extra precautions. Some have become infected from handling HIV-tainted blood or needles.

CHECK IT OUT!

<http://www.webmd.com/hiv-aids/guide/sexual-health-aids>

HIV BY THE NUMBERS

Q: How many people throughout the world now live with HIV?

A: More than 33 million.

Q: How many people in the U.S. have died from AIDS?

A: According to the Centers for Disease Control, an estimated 583,298 people have died from AIDS since it was first diagnosed in 1981.

Q: What percentage of people living with HIV are men who have sex with men?

A: 48%.

Q: What percentage of people living with HIV are women?

A: 25%.

Q: How many known cures are there for AIDS?

A: 0. While modern medicine races to find a cure for HIV and AIDS, one has yet to be discovered. Breakthroughs in drugs have created effective treatments to keep infection down and slow the onset of AIDS, but a certifiable cure remains a hope for the future.

Q: How many HIV and AIDS drugs are available?

A: There are more than 20 approved antiretroviral drugs but they're not all licensed or available in every country.

THE MOST COMMON MYTHS & MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HIV

Q: Can you get AIDS from just touching or hugging an infected person, or from touching their stuff?

A: No.

You CAN'T get it from:

- Public restroom use
- Swimming pools
- Day-to-day contact at work or school
- Shaking hands
- Drinking from a glass someone touched
- Being exposed to sneezing or coughing from an infected person

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has only recorded one case of possible HIV transmission through kissing. It involved an HIV-infected man with gum disease and a sexual partner also with significant gum disease. Closed mouth kissing is essentially a no-risk situation.

Q: Can HIV be transmitted through oral sex?

A: While the risk is not nearly as high as in vaginal or anal sex, HIV can be transmitted through both insertive and receptive oral sex. When body fluids can enter the bloodstream through cuts or gum tissue breaks, the threat is greater.

Q: Does HIV only affect homosexual men and drug users?

A: Nope. HIV can infect anybody. In the U.S., the main way to become infected for men is from homosexual sex, while for women it is heterosexual sex. Using condoms properly reduces the risk of contracting the virus.

Q: Does being HIV positive mean my life is over?

A: The death rate from AIDS in the early days of the epidemic was definitely high. But what seemed like an instant death sentence 25 years ago is not the same today. New drugs allow HIV-positive people to live longer, as well as those with AIDS.

Q: Can HIV be transmitted by mosquitoes?

A: No. Mosquitoes don't inject the blood of previous victims into new ones when they bite. They do inject saliva, which may carry diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, West Nile virus and yellow fever. Those illnesses can be transmitted into a mosquito's victim. But HIV is not transmitted in the same way.

THE TIP-OFF

Many myths surround HIV/AIDS. The best defense is educating yourself with the truth. Ask your doctor or specialist about any concerns you have. Read up from trusted medical materials and sources.

CHECK IT OUT!

http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misconceptions_about_HIV_and_AIDS

REMEMBER THIS

The word on the street is very often filled with bad information. Get the facts, not the rumors.

THE BEST DEFENSE

PREVENTION AND KNOWLEDGE

Knowing how to keep from getting HIV is important. The more knowledge you have about preventing the sickness, the better equipped you'll be to fight off the risk.

Q: Are latex condoms really effective in preventing HIV?

A: When you use latex condoms (or rubbers) regularly and correctly, they are protection from passing on HIV to another person. Condom use can't always protect against HIV. The best way to avoid passing on HIV is to not have sex or to be in a long-term relationship where each person is not having sex with others. Make sure your long-term partner has been tested for HIV and is not infected!

Q: How can I keep from getting HIV?

A: Avoid the sex activities that put you at the greatest risk. Always protect yourself. You can do that by:

- Using latex condoms each and every time you have vaginal, anal and oral sex.
- Avoid using condoms made from animal products.
- Use water-based lubricants instead of oil-based, which can weaken condoms.
- Never share needles to take drugs.
- Make sure that if you are having oral sex with a female that you are using a latex dental dam to prevent the spread of disease.

Q: Can you tell by looking at a person if he or she has HIV?

A: No. On average it takes eight years for symptoms of AIDS to develop after a person is infected with HIV. People who don't look or feel sick can infect you.

Q: If I'm HIV-positive, how can I prevent it from becoming AIDS?

A: Take good care of yourself and follow the treatment plan made for you by a doctor or specialist. Take your meds on a regular basis and have regular lab work done to catch any problems that arise early.

Q: I use and inject drugs. What should I do to prevent HIV?

A: STOP USING AND INJECTING DRUGS. Enter a drug abuse treatment program and stick with it. However, if you do continue to inject drugs, never share needles.

THE TIP-OFF

Condoms for free? Practicing safe sex doesn't have to be expensive. There are places that offer free condoms if you search them out. Some places that often have free condoms include:

- County Health departments
- STD clinics
- Planned Parenthood
- Campus Health Centers
- The Internet (search "Free condoms")

CHECK IT OUT!

<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/resources/qa/prevention.htm>

BEHIND THE SCREEN

GETTING TESTED FOR HIV

Early screenings for HIV can be invaluable in finding a problem and beginning a treatment plan to deal with it.

Q: Who should get tested for HIV?

A: According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control), all adults should get tested at least once. High-risk individuals such as needle drug users and people with multiple sex partners should be tested more frequently. All pregnant women should be tested, and of course, anyone exposed to the blood of an HIV-infected person.

Q: Why should I get tested for HIV?

A: It's really important to know about your health. If you're negative, you can take steps to make sure you stay that way. If you test positive, you can start a treatment plan to improve your health with the goal of extending your life. You can also change your behaviors and reduce the chances of infecting others.

REMEMBER THIS...

You can be HIV-positive and not have any symptoms for years. The only way for you or your partner to know if you're HIV-positive is to get tested.

Q: How often should I get tested?

A: Depends on your circumstances. Get tested at least once if you've never been before. The CDC recommends you get tested at least once a year if you do any of these activities that run the risk of passing the HIV infection to others:

- Injecting drugs or steroids
- Having sex for money or drugs
- Having sex with multiple partners since your last HIV test
- Having a sex partner who has had multiple partners since your last test

Be honest and open with your doctor and ask how frequently you should get tested, based on your circumstances, especially if you have hepatitis, tuberculosis or a sexually transmitted disease such as syphilis. This is your life you're dealing with. And the lives of those around you.

Q: What is the test like?

A: It's a simple blood test in which a small amount of blood is drawn from your arm or saliva is collected, sent to a lab and tested. Depending on the area in which you live, it could take less than an hour, a few days or a few weeks to get the results. If you think you've been exposed to HIV, call your doctor or Health Department as soon as possible.

THE TIP-OFF

Ready to be tested? Ask your health department, doctor or the CDC National AIDS Hotline (1-800-342-AIDS) about a testing location near you. Testing is confidential, and only you and your doctors will know the results.

CHECK IT OUT!

<http://www.hivtest.org>

TALK IT UP

DISCUSSING HIV AND AIDS WITH YOUR KIDS

Q: I have kids. How do I go about educating them about the realities of HIV and AIDS?

A: Research indicates that by the time they reach third grade, most children have heard about HIV/AIDS. It's important that they know the facts.

Here are some ways in which you can start a dialogue with your youngster.

START A CONVERSATION

Find a good opportunity to introduce the subject of HIV/AIDS to your child. Maybe it's after watching a TV show in which a character has the disease, or a commercial for a medication. Ask: "Have you heard of AIDS before? What do you know about the disease?" Let her talk about it and gauge her knowledge on the subject.

STATE THE FACTS

Use straight-forward, age-appropriate language and tone when presenting the facts. For children under nine years old, you might say:

For older children, you can supply more details:

AIDS is a disease that can make people very sick. It's caused by a virus —a tiny germ— called HIV.

The human body is made up of billions of cells. Some of these cells are T-cells, which fight disease and keep your body healthy. But if a body gets the HIV virus, that virus kills the T-cells and the body can't fight disease anymore. At that point, that person has AIDS.

If you've already spoken about the inner workings of sexual intercourse with your child, it's important for pre-teens to know how condoms can help protect people from getting AIDS and that it can be transmitted between people sharing drug needles. If you haven't talked about sex with them yet, don't bring it up during initial discussions about AIDS. It's not a good idea for your child's first information about sex to be associated with such a serious disease.

SET THEM STRAIGHT

If your daughter comes home upset because some kids on the playground told her she was going to get AIDS because she scraped her knee, explain to her:

You can't get AIDS from scraping your knee. You're fine. The way people get AIDS is when the body fluids from a person with AIDS mix with another person's fluids. Do you understand?

It's important to remember that for a child to understand the disease, it takes more than just one discussion. Talk about it at various times, calmly and compassionately.

BUILD THEIR SELF-ESTEEM

When kids feel good about themselves and who they are, they're more likely to withstand peer pressure to partake of sex and drug use. So praise them frequently and keep up with their interests, nurturing and encouraging them. Help them set realistic goals to achieve. Doing this will make them less likely to engage in behavior that might put them at risk for being exposed to AIDS.

THE REALITY OF DEATH

It's quite possible that the subject of death could come up when discussing the realities of AIDS. Be prepared by reading up on the subject. Keep these tips in mind:

- Explain death in simple, easy to grasp terms. Let them know that when someone dies, that person no longer breathes, eats, feels hot or cold or talks. You won't see that person again. It's a part of life.
- Don't explain that death is like sleep, or that a dead person is just sleeping. This could instill fear in the child that if he falls asleep, he could die.

CHECK IT OUT!

<http://www.talkwithkids.org/aids.html>

TO TELL THE TRUTH

Okay. This isn't going to be easy. But if you've tested positive for HIV, it's extremely important for you to be honest with yourself, your caregivers, your family and the people with whom you've had close physical contact. It could well be the toughest thing you've ever had to do. But being honest and brave and taking a course of action and treatment could save your life and the lives of others.

TELLING YOUR PARTNER

No two relationships are the same. Figure out the best time to confide in your partner with the details of your positive diagnosis. Avoid "heat of the moment" information bursts, as this is a highly emotional time. If you are unwilling or unable to tell your partner, your doctor or Health Department can help notify him/her. It is extremely important to tell your partner to avoid exposing him/her to HIV. In many states, it's the law to notify all partners.

Q: Who should I tell that I tested HIV-positive?

A: This can take a bit of thinking through. It's nothing to take lightly. Be careful who you tell. Before telling someone, ask yourself...

DO THEY REALLY NEED TO KNOW?

Sharing the news of being HIV-positive with the right people can strengthen personal relationships and provide a support network that'll be helpful to you.

TELLING YOUR PREVIOUS PARTNERS

This doesn't get any easier. However, it is very important to tell your previous sex partners or those with whom you've shared needles.

You can talk to your doctor about your options for telling previous partners. You can do it yourself or get help from your doctor or the health department.

Sometimes the health department can notify previous partners without mentioning your name.

It won't do anyone any good to accuse and argue about who gave what to whom. Work together and become a support system for one another, if at all possible.

TELLING YOUR FRIENDS

Telling those closest to you, and those you most trust, can teach you how to tell other people in your life. Be prepared for shock, pity, disbelief, helplessness and an endless amount of questions. It's possible that some of your friends will no longer want to be your friend. But your true friends will stick beside you and respect you for who you are, supporting you and guiding you through problems.

TELLING YOUR FAMILY

This depends on your family type. You know them best. If they're loving and supportive, your news could strengthen your relationship or cause pain and anxiety. Some family members may be very understanding. It could be the time to tell them things about you you've always wanted to, but didn't have the courage because of your fear of how they'd react. Knowing your family better than anyone, it's your decision as to what you'll tell them.

REMEMBER THIS

Having HIV doesn't stop you from being the person you were before you knew your test result.

CHECK IT OUT!

<http://www.avert.org/positive.htm>

THE TREATMENT PLAN

Being diagnosed as HIV-positive is a dramatic time in anyone's life, and means a lifetime full of changes and challenges. But it doesn't mean it's the end of life.

Q: How is HIV treated?

A: Medicine has made great strides with an HIV-positive diagnosis. There is a variety of treatments available today. These treatments can slow down the progress of HIV infection and in some cases actually stop it altogether. Amazing stuff.

Q: What's the first step?

A: Once HIV infection is confirmed, your doctor may start you on a drug treatment plan featuring a combination of anti-HIV drugs. These are sometimes called HAART (Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy). These drugs must be taken every single day, at the same time every day.

MISSION: DEFINITION

Retrovirus: An RNA (Ribonucleic acid) virus. Retroviruses have an enzyme that gives them the unique property of transcribing their RNA into DNA. The retroviral DNA can then integrate into the chromosomal DNA of the host cell to be expressed there. HIV, the cause of AIDS, is a retrovirus.

Q: What do HIV meds do exactly?

A: HIV medications help you control your HIV by:

- LOWERING YOUR VIRAL LOAD
- RAISING YOUR T-CELL COUNT, WHICH IMPROVES YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

Q: Are there side effects?

A: Unfortunately, all HIV medications can produce side effects. These can be:

- Diarrhea
- Nausea
- Abnormal body fat distribution

If the meds aren't taken correctly, the virus can mutate into a strain that doesn't respond to treatment of the virus.

Even if you experience some side effects, **DO NOT STOP TAKING YOUR MEDS** without talking to your doctor. Alert your doctor to all the meds you take: over the counter meds, vitamins, herbal supplements.

Q: Do these meds cure HIV?

A: No.

Q: Do these meds prevent someone with HIV from passing it to others?

A: No, but they can reduce the risk.

Q: What is HIV antiretroviral drug treatment?

A: While not a cure, antiretroviral drugs can stop people from becoming sick for many years. This treatment plan consists of drugs that are taken every day for the rest of a person's life. Antiretroviral treatment keeps the amount of HIV in a person's body low. It stops any weakening of the immune system, letting it recover from damage the HIV may have already caused.

These drugs are referred to as:

- Antiretrovirals
- ARVs
- Anti-HIV or anti-AIDS drugs

MISSION: DEFINITION

Antiretroviral: An agent or process effective against a retrovirus, such as a drug to treat HIV.

Q: Why do I have to take meds at the same time every day?

A: The virus can become resistant to the drugs if they're not taken exactly as prescribed. They can stop doing their job. Your doctor may have to prescribe a different combination of HIV medications then.

MISSION: DEFINITION

Adherence: Taking medications exactly as prescribed. HIV medications work more effectively if you stay on schedule 95% of the time.

CHECK IT OUT!

CDC National AIDS Hotline: 1 (800) CDC-INFO (232-4636)

Q: What is a viral load?

A: Viral load is the amount of virus in your blood. The lower your viral load, the less HIV there is in your body. That's the goal of your treatment: to lower your viral load.

Q: How do CD4+ cells help?

A: CD4+ (T-cells) are white blood cells that help your body fight infection. The higher your CD4+ cell count, the better your body's chance is of fighting infection.

THE TIP-OFF

Q: Got any tips for taking meds?

A: How about 10 of them?

1. Try to take your meds during a regular daily activity, like watching the news, brushing your teeth or getting ready for bed. Make it part of your daily routine. Pretty soon you'll feel incomplete if you don't do it.
2. Set a timer or alarm to go off when it's time to take your meds.
3. A pillbox can help you stay organized if you're taking multiple medications.
4. Keep a journal of your medication routine so you can track whether you've taken your pills or not.
5. Put your meds where you can't miss them, like near the phone or your keys or the coffee maker or your nightstand.
6. Always carry an extra dose with you, just in case you're not home when it's time to take your medications.
7. Don't forget to take your meds with you if you go away on vacation. Bring enough to last the length of your stay, plus some extra, just in case.
8. If you're flying, bring your meds in a carry-on bag in case your luggage is lost or your flight is delayed.
9. Don't wait until your prescription runs out to get a refill. Always refill your meds a week before they run out.
10. Don't go it alone. It's always okay to ask for help.

SEEKING SUPPORT

THE HELP OF SUPPORT GROUPS

You're not alone in battling this new challenge. Friends, family or an established support group can help you stick to your treatment plan and provide you with encouragement and direction. Just being there when you need them is invaluable.

Q: What if I don't feel comfortable talking to my friends and family members about this?

A: Seek out your local AIDS Service Organization. Many of them have programs designed to help you stick with your medication schedule.

Q: Where can I find the support group that's right for me?

A: Here are few ideas:

Look online. There are many resources there for local, regional and national support outlets.

Ask your doctor for materials on support groups.

Call the National AIDS Hotline: 1-800-342-AIDS (English) / 1-800-344-7432 (Spanish).

Q: LOTS OF PEOPLE ARE DOING THIS AND SEEING REAL RESULTS. IF THEY CAN DO IT, I CAN TOO. RIGHT?

A: RIGHT!

CHECK IT OUT!

<http://hiv.supportgroups.com/>

OTHER RESOURCES

NATIONAL S.T.D. HOTLINE

Phone: 800-227-8922

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL CDC AIDS/STD HOTLINE NUMBER

(1-800-342-2437) or (800)-227-8922 & (800)-243-7889 TTY

(800)-344-7432 Spanish

Website: www.cdc.gov

NATIONAL AIDS INFORMATION CLEARINGHOUSE

Phone: 800-458-5231

AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR AIDS RESEARCH

733 3rd Avenue

12th Floor / New York, NY 10017

Phone: 212-682-7440

GAY MEN'S HEALTH CRISIS

129 West 20th Street

New York, NY 10011

Phone: 212-807-6655

HIV AND GAY-SPECIFIC SERVICES

715 West 179th Street

(corner of Fort Washington Avenue)

New York, NY 10033

(212) 795-4226.

HIV TESTING & COUNSELING - STD CLINIC

Howard Brown Memorial Clinic

945 West George

Chicago, IL 60657

Contact: Social Services Dept.

Phone: 312-871-5777

PEDIATRIC AIDS FOUNDATION

2407 Wilshire Boulevard

Suite 613

Santa Monica, CA 90403

SAN FRANCISCO AIDS FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 6182

San Francisco, CA 94101-6182

Contact: Pat Christen, Director

In CA: AIDS Hotline, 415-863-AIDS

THE FAQs OF HIV

In this book you'll get straight answers to questions about:

- WHAT HIV IS
- EFFECTIVE TREATMENT PLANS
- HOW TO TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT HIV
- WHERE TO FIND VALUABLE RESOURCES
- HOW TO TELL PEOPLE YOU'VE TESTED POSITIVE

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